Dek Unu Magazine

July 2021

The Rest Between Two Notes

Fran Forman

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Eleven

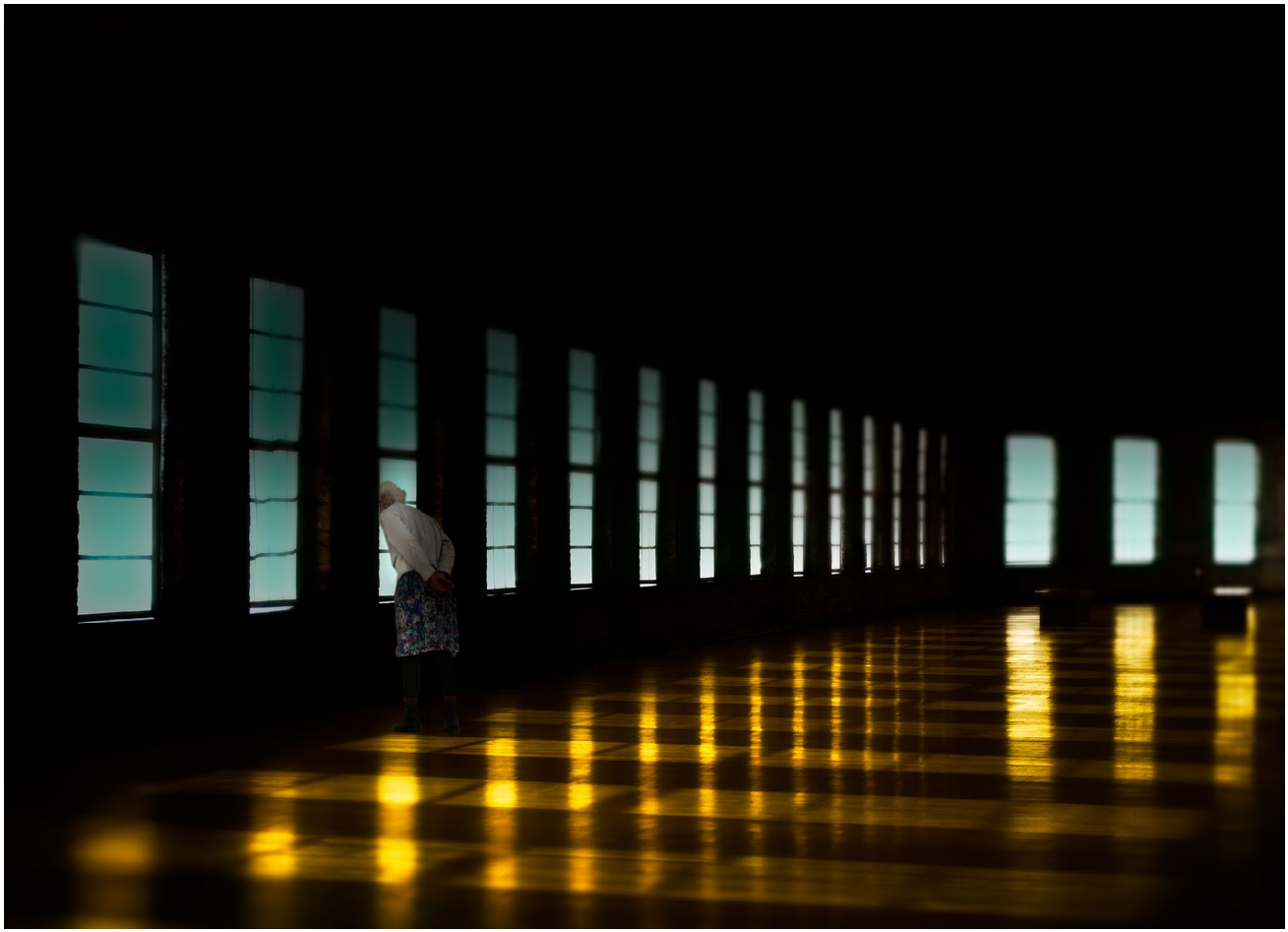
This is **Dek Unu Magazine**. In Esperanto**,** *dek unu* means "eleven." Eleven images from a single artist. Eleven artists in eleven solo issues each year. **Dek Unu** publishes the work of a new photoartist in each issue. The artist's work and words are featured alone and in individual focus as the sole purpose for each issue of the magazine. Unlike other arts and letters magazines which might look for work from a variety of artists to support an editorial staff's theme, at **Dek Unu**, theme and imagery are always each artist's own.

This Month

New England artist-photographer Fran Forman creatively combines straight photography, digital photo-manipulation, painting, and stage design to create images that are highly emotionally charged instants, captured in enigmatic, clock-stopped silence. She thinks of each image as a still in a noir movie frame, a single elusive moment among moments, or, in another way, a rest between two notes. Solitary figures, sometimes blurred, turned away, or immersed in shadow, live in stylized geometric spaces, splashed with light and saturated color. Acknowledging a debt to the 17th century Masters' chiaroscuro, along with Edward Hopper's trademark directional light, and the moody, stylized work of certain poetic cinematographers, Forman creates personal dreamscapes that often seem oddly familiar to the rest of us. These are "interiors," both literally and figuratively. Most are shots in rooms, hallways, and stairwells; even the one landscape in the series conveys a distinct sense of enclosure. But by her creative craft, the artist also creates a palpable effect of psychological space, an effect that encloses both the viewer and the viewed in a shared, somewhat eerie story – a story of coming and leaving, innocence and confidence, shadow and light, night and day, absence and connection, loss and longing, and not quite the past and not yet the future.

Looking

Equally as exciting as the art installations in the Massachusets Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA) are the geometric patterns of light though the ancient loft windows.



Spiral Stairs

"…The formal composition coupled with the soft, glowing colors complete an image that is easily etched into one's memory, filled with questions but absent of any answers."

– *Dr. Stu Levy*

Girl in the Shadow

Like all my image-making, this one consists of fragments of many photographs, from Shanghai to upstate New York to the most eastern town in Massachusetts. The narrative, however, is universal.

Elegant Decay

"…If this were a dream, the stairs have great symbolic significance. Descending usually is interpreted as regressive, and in the context of an old home, symbolizes re-visiting the past. The young woman, quickly descending the stairs, may in fact be fleeing rather than simply descending. The splashes of red on her dress signal danger!"

– *Dr. David Weinberg*

Emma with Lights

"…She couldn't catch it clearly, only see the reflection of the reflection, see herself faint and fractured, diminished in the window through which the white shafts of light pulsed so strongly, knowing their own mind."

– *Monica Raymond*

After the Rains

"…Through storm clouds
belly purple
and the dusk hills
sprawls of ink
still I am
a small taper
flaxen and lit
But how long can this last….?

– *Monica Raymond*

Portals

"The ancients knew the importance of portals, and they continue to represent powerful symbols…[The girl] is about to enter a new, more mature phase of her life. She is drawn to the red room, yet hesitates on the threshold, sensing the risks…"

– Dr. David Weinberg

Child's Gaze

"Expanding on her visual narratives of composited photographs showcased in her first monograph, *The Escape Artist*, her substantial new book moves the work into a realm of richly colored capacious photo-paintings that explore space in a new way, leaving room for liminal and psychological moments and for the imagination to create stories of what might be. The compositions are dreamlike, filled with shadow and light and color, with figures that appear as if in dreams, moving through space with a sense of mystery."

– *Aline Smithson, Lenscratch*

Woman Descending

“One can get truly lost in these images of magic realism, immersed in the evocative use of light and rich jewel tones paving the way to a fantastical dream state.”

– *Jane Fulton Alt*

Lookout

"…from her lookout
a new view."

– *Nadine Boughton*

Portrait of Woman with Linen Wimple

"…She is a visual chanteuse, and this is where Forman's strength lies. The additive nature of conjuring a reality from various visual sources, and masterfully blending them into works of art is dreamlike and evocative. Her intuitive visual stories are arresting…"

– *Cary Benbow, fStop Magazine*

Welcome to *Dek Unu*, Fran! You have always been an artist and image-maker.

As a child in Baltimore, I drew constantly – on papers my father brought back from his paper supply warehouse and in the margins of my school books. Mostly I drew faces. For my 13th birthday, I asked my parents for a subscription to *Look* magazine; I thought their photographs were even better than those I saw in *Life*, and I copied these photographs, paying special attention to the faces and shading. This was my art education, and from those mid-century photographic masters, I absorbed a sense of composition through the use of light and shadow, balance, and symmetry. I sensed that a photograph could make me feel…something. To this day, I remember the emotional impact of the exhibit, *The Family of Man,* at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Solo Exhibition, 2014 ©Bob Flack

It was assumed that I would "do something with my art" when I grew up. But my growing up took a long time and was subsumed by getting caught up in the remarkable cultural and social shifts of the '60s. Making art seemed too individualistic when we were trying to "change

the world." I became a foot-soldier in the protest movements, studied sociology and anthropology, and then became a social worker. Eventually, what had deteriorated into mindless doodling returned to actual picture-making.

Support and motivation are, with talent, the tripod that helps many artists to get going and keep going. Your motivators?

My mother encouraged me in my interest in art, which was unusual given her upbringing in a depression-era, conventional and patriarchal culture. I'm sure she was worried about how I would support myself, but she was unconditional in her love and support. And many friends along the way who watched me incessantly doodling encouraged me to "take my art more seriously." The current community of photographers has embraced my work, as I have theirs, and that group continues to inspire and excite me. I am in awe of the talent and creativity that surrounds me.

I believe that every artist suffers occasionally from imposter syndrome. But over time, I have become more confident about my work and my craftsmanship. It's incredibly reaffirming when my work is referred to as poetic, painterly, metaphorical, and labeled as "photo-painting." These reviews and comments are validating, and when I'm in the midst of a fallow period, they give me enough confidence to keep working. So to answer your question…yes, these validations are indeed meaningful when they come from respected artists, and others, because they make me realize I'm reaching someone else.

Many of us remember the first photograph, from our earliest days of "fooling around" that actually "worked," sometimes the one that led to a career. Yours?

In the mid-70s, I planned to travel around the world, solo. I had the fantasy that I would document the journey, and I packed a little film camera into my backpack. I knew nothing about photography, and all but two of those snapshots belong in the dust heap. But

there were two that stood out. One was taken in Italy and shows a young man carving a piece of marble. I loved the contrasts in dark and light: his black hair and mustache, the white of the marble, his determined expression.

The other photo was a mistake. I was aiming the camera up to shoot a group of little boys on a balcony laughing at me, the foreigner. But I missed their faces and shot only their torsos and little hands and legs behind the railing. When it was eventually printed, I felt so foolish. But then I came to see it as something different and special, and it now hangs on the wall of my house.

©Fran Forman

You made a couple of career stops and turns on your way to becoming a pro photographer.

During my travels (I never made it around the world), I met a man in Jerusalem who taught graphic design, a discipline I was unfamiliar with. When he explained what graphic designers did, I knew immediately I wanted to be one. I had a large collection of posters, never wondering who had created them. I came to understand that graphic design is the intersection of fine art, psychology, and commerce, and record album covers were designed by graphic designers! I returned to the States to prepare to submit a portfolio to gain admission to an MFA program in graphic design. But other than a few drawings and my pathetic snapshots from my trip, I had little to offer (I'd been a sociology major and taken a few classes in art, but my work was hardly distinguished).

Around that time, I met a man at MIT who ran what was then called "the Visible Language Workshop," and it housed a few large offset presses and a darkroom. In exchange for keeping the facilities clean and tidy, I got to spend as much time there as I wanted. A young undergraduate named Ram Rahman (now a distinguished photographer in Dehli) taught me how to make prints, and I was off and running. I became obsessed! Those solitary days and long nights in the darkroom were my sole photography training.

More than one of us has pursued a career while a passion waited patiently to one side. Graphic design?

When I eventually did begin the MFA program in Graphic Design (at Boston University), I continued to spend all my time in the darkroom, even running the stat camera for the department. But by my second year, I realized I still hadn't learned much about graphic design and that I couldn't figure out a way to make a living as a fine art photographer, so I abandoned photography for the next 15 years – just in time for analog film to give way to digital.

After I received my MFA, and barely competent as a designer (having spent too much time in the darkroom), I landed a job designing banners for the architectural firm renovating 18th century warehouses at the harbor in Boston, Faneuil Hall Marketplace, one of the first urban, festive marketplaces in the US. The founder of the company, a visionary, had brought Design Research and Marimekko into the States and was now introducing the concept of celebratory urban centers, altering the urban landscape forever. I designed signage and, then, print collateral for buildings and many restaurants, met my current husband, an architect, and we set out to start our own firm. Over the next few years, we designed signage systems and branding, but gave up the business after our kids were born.

By the time my younger daughter was five, I was itching to get back to work, but that was in the late 80s and, to my horror, I discovered that the digital revolution had begun…I felt like Rip Van Winkle!

Computers came as quite a shock to pre-press folks.

Graphic design rapidly shifted to digital technology, and I found myself left behind in the analog world of ruby-lith, exacto blades, and typesetting. In 1989, I began using a computer to draw pictures and soon after was introduced to a new and at the time revolutionary program developed for photo-retouchers – Photoshop. Immediately, I was back in the world of photography, and, in this case, manipulating them on a computer.

Did you go back to school to re-train and re-tread for digital?

I took another class, this one at Harvard's extension school. The class was called *Multimedia*, and I had no idea what that meant. I was, by far, the oldest and least technically proficient person in the class, but I worked the hardest and fell in love yet again. I could now manipulate photographs, draw digitally, and create animations with my images in sync with music. How cool was that!

This was in 1992, and I took my new set of tools and started working free-lance. Soon I was creating CD-ROMs (remember them?), and, for two years, I worked on a project devoted to the work, life, and beat culture of Jack Kerouac. I did all the artwork – hyperlinked book illustrations, navigation, galleries, chronology, and various animations. I worked while my kids were in school and most evenings after they went to bed.

Did work for hire influence your fine art photography?

I inherited a treasure trove of old photographs from my mother, and I bought my first scanner – for $1000! I combined images of my ancestors with those of my children – past meets present – and found a way to keep my mother in my life, pixel by pixel. I delved into archival material, incorporating ephemera with my images. Thus began my return to an artistic life, where I could integrate my love of drawing and photography. This early personal work was an attempt to forge a connection and blur the boundaries between generations, species, and the natural world, where memories, whimsy, and fragments of dreams collided.

Did your fine art focus leak into your work for hire?

I eventually landed a job as a designer for a new website. This was Africana.com, founded by Professor Henry Louis Gates in 1999. The site was developed to provide daily news and commentary devoted to the African diaspora. At first, I was – yet again – in over my head, as I was unfamiliar with the burgeoning world wide web. Since I was mainly interested in creating images, I designed a visually rich site that was a bit ahead of its time and gave me the opportunity to create new images every day. (And those were the days when all images had to be tiny and low-res – remember, we were still on dial-up!) Our little company eventually was bought by TimeWarner which became incorporated with AOL, so I became a designer with AOL – until they closed us down. Newly unemployed, with kids now out of the house, I thought I might try making art – just for me. And that was exactly sixteen years ago.

After the Rains ©Fran Forman

Your piece, *After the Rains,* is a killer. Where did you find it, and how did you create such an affecting image!?

I'm so glad you like it! It's constructed from only a few photographs. I was fortunate to have an artist residency on a small island in the southwest of Norway in 2016. Late in the day, late in the summer, and after a rainfall, the light – always spectacular in

that part of the world – was just magical. Because of the earlier rainfall and darkened skies, the cottage's light was on. I simply shot the little house in that location and composited additional clouds from that afternoon. The little girl was a composite of several children I had photographed a few days before, and I love how her blond hair replicated the light from the window. Her expression is somewhat prayerful and supplicating, I think. A poet friend wrote a poem to this image called "The Lit House." I always spend a lot of time experimenting with placement, arrangement, texture, and color. This is the part of the process most like painting. It's experimental, organic, and intuitive. I just work on it until it feels right. There's no set formula. I probably couldn't even replicate it.

You teach. Is there an area, process, or theoretical approach that you particularly enjoy teaching?

I only teach experienced and advanced students, and they tend to be older. I'm interested in helping the student learn to look at every corner, every pixel of an image; I don't like teaching the technical stuff, although I do impart little short-cuts and gems along the way. I want them to make art, not technology.

Because my students are usually far along in their image-making and well-established as artists, quite often a former student will win a competition that rejected my entry!

I love being a juror because I get to look at images. I'm looking for images that surprise, that make an emotional connection, that show something mundane in an unusual way, that have an aura of mystery, that are well-crafted with a strong composition and, of course, use of light. I look for images where every pixel has a meaning. I look for images that make me wish I had made them.

I'm not interested in how the image was made. So many folks now are experimenting with alternative processes, which is fine, but it's the image that should be dominant. The process is only in the service of the image, in my opinion.

Is there a "message," about photography, art, or artists that you always share with your students?

I actually encourage people to look outside of photography. Our gang does tend to be a tad insular, don't you think? I encourage them to look at painters, contemporary and long gone, to listen to music, to watch films, to read books, good books. In each class, I ask them to give a report on an artist of their choosing. Much of my inspiration comes from painters such as Caravaggio, the Northern European painters of the 17th century, modern painters like Rothko, Edward Hopper, architects like Luis Barragan, and so many more. In fact, I've spent an inordinate amount of time just looking at art. How lucky we are to have it at our fingertips every day!

After they've found some success, most photo-artists dream of publishing a book. You have published two!

My first book, *Escape Artist*, was published by Schiffer Publishing, Ltd., in 2014. On a very short 5-month schedule, I designed it myself, learning inDesign for the purpose, and I must say, it is not a process for the faint of heart. Although it was successful and led to the extraordinary honor of an exhibition at the Henry Fox Talbot Museum in Wiltshire, England, I vowed never to embark on such a project again. But…five years later, I was approached by Unicorn Publishing, a UK publishing house with a small art imprint.

For the next book, *The Rest Between Two Notes*, I made the wiser decision to hire a designer, and (again) we had only 5 months to

complete the pdf to send to the printer. But the process was even more arduous; sequencing, editing, and culling were mind-bogglingly complicated. I invited 33 writers to contribute pieces related to the 110 images in the book and the integration of text and image was crucial. The result, printed by one of the best art book printers in China, weighs about 5 pounds, with accurate and luminous color. From the start, I envisioned the book to be an object of beauty, not just a compilation of my images, and I can honestly say that this book is an ART object, not simply a book of photographs.

Quick links to Fran Forman's books online	https://tinyurl.com/ffescapeartist https://tinyurl.com/restbetween

Your mastery of light effects is so complete! Do you use specialized gear: lenses, cameras, software, or other tricks of the trade to get such painterly results?

I've always felt that I'm more of a painter than a photographer. I get bored easily with gear talk. For me, the photo that I take is simply the place to start "painting." I use Lightroom for the catalogs and Photoshop for post-processing. Occasionally, I use Lumenzia for simple tonal selections.

I'm very low-tech. I usually shoot with my Nikon but am moving more towards using a small mirrorless Sony, due to its weight and portability. And I use my iPhone camera (12ProMax) now which shoots RAW format files. Sometimes I play with an old Nikon that I had fitted with a Holga lens. I have a strobe but never use it. I don't use other equipment. I have several tripods but never use them. I work on a Mac with a 27" screen and a second monitor. I rely on my Wacom tablet. When I travel, I take my laptop and a smaller Wacom with me. I also use my iPad. I'm always looking at my images on my iPad after I think I've finished them, and I always find something to fix.

Thanks, Fran! What's next? Do you have plans for the near (or distant) future?

I'm continuing to work on my constructed images that suggest ambiguity, disconnection, and the illusion of the American Dream. I'm already thinking of another book – God help me! Given the limitations imposed by our year-long lockdown, I'm itching to start traveling again. I'm planning to visit Amsterdam in April and revel in the works of the 17th century Masters. I've been teaching advanced workshops over Zoom and will continue to do so both online and in-person: Griffin Museum of Photography, Southeast Center of Photography, Los Angeles Center of Photography, and Colorado Photography Art Center.

Links and Resources

Website: franforman.com
Instagram: franforman

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